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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000852

SIPDIS

EUR/CARC AND DRL FOR WENDY SILVERMAN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES ELECTION, GEORGIA WITH HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

REF: A. BAKU 820

[1](#)B. BAKU 779

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: On August 29, leading Azerbaijani human rights activists Novella Jafaroglu-Appelbaum, Saida Gojamanly, and Saadat Benanyarly discussed with the Ambassador their concern over the conflict in Georgia and the threat it poses for Azerbaijan. In a surprising twist, they explained that President Aliyev is now in a tough situation, and said that they will support him in the upcoming elections in order to preserve stability in Azerbaijan. They felt, however, that the pre-election environment is not democratic, and that the President's August 26 pardon decree did not extend to the most important prisoners. They asked for increased U.S. and European influence in Azerbaijan to ensure the country's sovereign and independent future and to counter the pressure of the "monsters" to Azerbaijan's north and south. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) On August 29 the Ambassador met with Novella Jafaroglu-Appelbaum of the Association for the Protection of Women's Rights, Saida Gojamanly of the Bureau of Human Rights and Law Respect, and Saadat Benanyarly of the International Service for Human Rights. These three women are well-known and respected advocates for the improvement of human rights in Azerbaijan.

GEORGIAN CONFLICT  
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[1](#)3. (C) Jafaroglu-Appelbaum began the discussion by describing her recent trip to Georgia. She met with Georgian NGOs and stated that she supports the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Gojamanly further explained that they believe the situation in Georgia is a threat to Azerbaijan's economic strategy and energy export routes. The three activists, along with another well-known human rights activist Arzu Abdullayeva, have appealed to President Ilham Aliyev to support Georgia and to defend Azerbaijan's interests. Benanyarly stated that they felt President Aliyev was in a tough position now internationally, and that he faced an important choice. Benanyarly felt it was important that the United States have as much influence as possible on President Aliyev at this critical juncture.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS  
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[1](#)4. (C) The three women also explained to the Ambassador that the current period leading up the October presidential

election was regrettable. Gojamanly described the political stagnation of the country, explaining that people had lost trust in democratic elections this year. Jafaroglu-Appelbaum stated that she felt that election-day procedures would be conducted freely and fairly, because there was no serious candidate running against President Aliyev. Benanyarly stressed the need for more dialogue between the government and civil society, and expressed optimism that this could be possible after Aliyev's re-election, when he will feel that he is in a stronger position. All three women agreed that there will not be large protests after the election. Despite these democratic shortcomings, all three women surprisingly announced that they would now support Aliyev winning a second term because stability of the country was most important at this point. They plan to continue their human rights advocacy during his second term, however. They argued as they have before that the best way for the international community to promote democratic change in the country would be to press for acceleration of Azerbaijan's accession to NATO.

#### PRISONER PARDON

15. (C) The three activists also discussed President Aliyev's August 26 pardon of 96 prisoners (ref A). Gojamanly explained that six of the 32 people on their list of political prisoners had been pardoned in this decree. She felt that this was not a step forward in democracy, however, because there are still a number of political prisoners in jail and there is still active pressure on journalists and

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religious Muslims. Jafaroglu-Appelbaum stated that another pardon decree that freed the three high-level journalists in prison as well as a number of very ill prisoners would help President Aliyev win back support from the Azerbaijani people. She asked the Ambassador to pass this message to President Aliyev.

#### RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

16. (C) Finally, the activists expressed their fear of Russian influence in Azerbaijan. Gojamanly explained that she thought the Russians were behind the August 17 attack on the Abu Bakr mosque in Baku (ref B). She believes that Russia wanted to stir up minorities in Azerbaijan, and therefore were trying to provoke religious extremism. Jafaroglu-Appelbaum added that there must be someone local giving these orders. She then concluded the meeting by stating that Azerbaijan has "monsters" to its north (Russia) and south (Iran) and therefore it needed U.S. and European influence in order to secure its independent future.

#### COMMENT

17. (C) The decision of these human rights activists to support President Aliyev in the upcoming election, despite the poor pre-election environment, is a major shift from their previous position, but consistent with what we are hearing more generally. The Russian invasion of Georgia has shaken Azerbaijanis across the political spectrum. Stability is now a priority. Many Azerbaijanis openly fear further Russian influence and interference, and are looking for rapid steps towards closer ties to the west and Europe to secure Azerbaijan's independence and security.

DERSE